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Turner, MJ ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1975-5561>
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Proposing a rational resilience credo for use with athletes

Martin J. Turner¹

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¹ Centre for Sport, Health and Exercise Research, Staffordshire University

26 Abstract

27 While the reported use of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is growing in
28 sport, little is written about specific tools used by practitioners when applying REBT
29 with athletes. The Athlete Rational Resilience Credo (ARRC) adapts Dryden's (2007)
30 original Rational Resilience Credo for application with athletes. The ARRC promotes
31 rational beliefs in athletes, which are important for resilient responding to adverse
32 events. The ARRC is presented in full, followed by some explanation as to its
33 purposes, critical practitioner reflections, and guidance for its use in sport.

34 Keywords: CBT; counseling; emotions; irrational beliefs; REBT

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51 Proposing a rational resilience credo for use with athletes
52 Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1957) is a prominent theory and
53 psychological approach to understanding how individuals react to adversity,
54 therapeutically helping people to respond adaptively to occurrences such as failure,
55 rejection, and ill treatment. In REBT, the maxim “people are disturbed not by things,
56 but by the view which they take of them” (Ellis, 1989, p6) is fundamental, but more
57 specifically, if the view individuals take of ‘things’ is irrational, they are likely to
58 experience disturbed (dysfunctional) emotional and behavioral reactions. At the core
59 of REBT is the notion that rigid, illogical, and extreme beliefs lead to dysfunctional
60 emotions and maladaptive behaviors, which impede personal goal attainment, well-
61 being, and mental health (Ellis & Dryden, 1997).

62 In REBT there are four core irrational beliefs, one primary belief
63 (demandingness) and three secondary beliefs (awfulizing, frustration intolerance, and
64 depreciation) that are derived from the primary belief. Mirroring the irrational beliefs,
65 there are four core rational beliefs, one primary belief (preferences) and again three
66 secondary beliefs (anti-awfulizing, frustration tolerance, and acceptance) that are
67 derived from the primary belief (Dryden, 2009). Irrational beliefs are rigid, illogical,
68 and extreme, while rational beliefs are flexible, logical, and non-extreme (Dryden,
69 2013). For clarity, the irrational and rational beliefs of REBT are provided in Table 1.

70 The extant research reveals that irrational beliefs are associated with
71 emotional dysfunction such as anxiety (trait, social, speech, test, evaluation), burnout,
72 anger and shame, and psychopathological conditions including depression, and
73 suicide thoughts (see Browne, Dowd, & Freeman, 2010, for a review). Irrational
74 beliefs are also related to maladaptive behaviours such as social avoidance, self-
75 harming, procrastination, anger suppression, aggression, violence, and medication use

(see Szentagotai & Jones, 2010, for a review). Rational beliefs are proposed to promote functional emotions and adaptive behaviours that enhance long-term goal attainment, well-being, and psychological health. Rational beliefs are associated with functional (emotional and behavioural) responses to adversity (see Caserta, Dowd, David, & Ellis, 2010 for review) and some consider rational beliefs to be “protective factors” (David, Freeman, & DiGiuseppe, 2010, p. 197) in stressful situations, that have also been discussed in relation to resilience (e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Understandably, much research attention has been given to exploring the many harmful effects of irrational beliefs rather than the benefits of high rational beliefs. It should be noted that low irrational beliefs do not necessarily mean high rational beliefs, as the two beliefs are relatively orthogonal (i.e., they do not correlate highly; Ellis, David, & Lynn, 2010).

So, rational beliefs are to be strived for, and through REBT irrational beliefs are disputed and replaced with rational beliefs. The therapeutic process of REBT (Dryden, 2009; Dryden & Branch, 2008) encourages individuals to understand that irrational beliefs (B) cause their dysfunctional emotional and behavioural responses (C), not the event (A) alone. Once this ABC framework is understood, the client is helped to dispute (D) their irrational beliefs and replace them with rational alternatives (E). REBT is efficacious in both clinical and nonclinical populations with youths and adults (Daniel & Avellino, 2002; David, Szentagotai, Eva, & Macavei, 2005; Engles, Garnefski, & Diekstra, 1993; Gonzalez, Nelson, Gutkin, Saunders, Galloway, & Shwery, 2004; Lyons & Woods, 1991) and its reported use with athletes is growing. Recent research has shown that REBT applied at one to one (Turner & Barker, 2013) and group (Turner, Slater, & Barker, 2014; 2015) levels can reduce irrational beliefs and anxiety in athletes. Sport literature has also offered guidelines

for the application and evaluation of REBT in sport (Turner & Barker, 2014), and new developments in the measurement of irrational beliefs have led to a performance-specific measure for use in sport (Turner et al., in press).

Support for the efficacy of REBT is perhaps unsurprising given that it is a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), considered to be the most effective form of psychological therapy recommended by NICE for many conditions including depression, social and generalised anxiety, and eating disorders (Layard & Clark, 2014). REBT is considered a form of CBT, but is distinguished by several features. Most prominently, in CBT it is common to dispute the A (inference about the adversity), and collaboratively focus on the validity of ensuing automatic thoughts. Whereas in REBT A is assumed to be true, whilst the B (the belief about the A) is under scrutiny and disputed vigorously. Therefore REBT focuses expressly on irrational beliefs rather than inferences and automatic thoughts (e.g., DiGuiseppe, 2007). For example, a netball athlete may be anxious on approach to an upcoming National trial due to the perceived prospect of being harshly and negatively judged and evaluated. In CBT it would be typical to dispute the inference that the athlete would be harshly and negatively judged and evaluated (the A). But in REBT, the athlete's belief that they *must not* be harshly and negatively judged and evaluated is disputed, thus providing potentially deeper and more elegant cognitive reconstruction. In REBT, the core belief is challenged, not the inference of the event or situation.

Because of the relative scarcity of REBT research in sport (see Turner, 2014, for a review), the precise tools applied during REBT has not yet been given attention in sport and exercise psychology literature. Turner and Barker (2014) offered the first detailed account of how REBT can be used with athletes, recounting the broad structure of REBT and some of the activities and homework assignments utilized as a

core aspect of the approach. However, practitioners may benefit from understanding specific techniques used during REBT to help athletes replace irrational beliefs with rational beliefs. One such technique is the Athlete Rational Resilience Credo (ARRC), based on the original work of Windy Dryden (2007), who developed the Rational Resilience Credo. In this paper I hope to bring to attention Dryden's credo by offering an athlete version for use in sport. I also detail how the athlete version can be used, reflect on how I have used it in the past in my consultancy, and discuss the limitations of the ARRC, leading to suggestions for much needed further research.

Dryden's rational resilience credo

According to Dryden (2007) and Neenan (2009) there is some symmetry between REBT and the concept of resilience that may help to better understand and develop resilience. Notably, those who are able to react to adversity with rational beliefs are more likely to evidence resilience compared to those who react with irrational beliefs. Resilience here is considered a process of adapting well in the face of adversity, recognizing that emotional distress is very much a part of becoming resilient (see Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015), and that coming back from adversity is not necessarily an immediate occurrence (American Psychological Association, 2004; Dryden, 2007). Indeed, Neenan (2009) makes the distinction between 'bouncing back' and 'coming back' suggesting that the popular view is that resilient individuals spring back to their former selves effortlessly, raising the question as to whether a true adversity was indeed experienced. Neenan also points out that following adversity an individual rarely returns to exactly the same state as they were prior to the adversity. They are changed for better or for worse, depending on their ability to adapt. In sport, recent research (see Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014, for a review; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2013; Turner & Barker, 2013) has helped to galvanize the area of

resilience somewhat. Based on their findings, Fletcher and Sarkar defined psychological resilience as "the role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors" (2012, p. 675, 2013, p. 16). Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) suggest that there is a need for techniques that encourage resilience. Specifically, due to the central role of challenge appraisal and meta-cognitions in their grounded theory of resilience, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) asserted that "educational programs in challenge appraisal and meta-reflective strategies, such as evaluating personal assumptions, minimizing catastrophic thinking, challenging counterproductive beliefs, and cognitive restructuring, should form a central part of resilience training" (p. 676). REBT is a technique that can minimize catastrophic thinking and challenges counterproductive beliefs, and the ARRC is a specific tool that can bolster this approach.

To encourage successful adaptation to adversity, Dryden's (2007) Rational Resilience Credo presents "a set of beliefs, which expresses a particular opinion and influences the way you live" (p. 219). Specifically, the Rational Resilience Credo is a set of rational beliefs born from REBT theory, promoting an ideal resilient response to adversity. While Dryden's Rational Resilience Credo has proved to be valuable within my consultancy work with athletes, I have adapted the credo to suit the audience with whom I apply the credo. That is, I have developed the ARRC based on Dryden's credo, and in doing so, have found a number of uses for the credo in sport. In this paper, I present the ARRC and break it down into the theoretical components to make it clear as to how the credo is structured, and how it can be applied.

Structure and purpose of the ARRC

The ARRC comprises one paragraph for each of the primary and secondary rational beliefs, referring to content areas of achievement, performance consistency, security, development, fair and respectful treatment, acceptance and approval of others, and opportunities. These content areas are important for athletes and commonly become the focus of irrational beliefs (Turner et al., in press). Paragraph one covers preferences (primary rational belief), whereas paragraphs two, three, and four cover anti-awfulizing, frustration tolerance, and acceptance (secondary irrational beliefs), respectively. Paragraph five promotes rational adherence to the ARRC.

The Athlete Rational Resilience Credo (ARRC)

As an athlete and a human being I have many desires or “wants”. Some of these desires are very strong as I am driven to be the best athlete I can possibly be. However, I recognize that no matter how strong my desires are this does not mean that I “have to” or “must” have my desires met. I may want to be successful, perform consistently, be secure in my team, and keep developing my skills, but I know that these desires do not “have to” be met. I would also much prefer to be treated fairly and with respect, be accepted and valued by coaches and teammates, and be given opportunities, but I realize that wanting this from others does not mean that they have to meet my desires. I accept that from time to time my desires will not be met. It’s OK that I feel upset and disappointed when my desires are not met, as this shows that I care about my sport and my achievement within it. My upset feelings are healthy and they motivate me to work hard towards my desires, knowing full well that demanding that these desires are met is rigid, nonsensical, and fruitless. Not having my wants met provides me with opportunities to grow as an athlete and

199 as a person, fully accepting that unfavorable events are valuable even though
200 they lead to negative feelings.

201 I recognize that when my desires are not met, I fail, face setbacks, or
202 am treated poorly, this is bad and unfortunate but not terrible or the end of the
203 world. No matter how bad it is to not have my desires met, I know that worse
204 things could and have happened to me, none of which are truly awful. It is bad
205 not to be successful, not to perform consistently, not be secure in my team, and
206 not to keep developing my skills, but I know that this is not awful. I also realize
207 that it is not terrible to be treated unfairly and with disrespect, or not to be
208 accepted and valued by coaches and teammates. Further, if I am not given
209 opportunities, this certainly is not the end of the world. Even though I might
210 feel upset and my goal attainment may be hindered, I can distinguish
211 inconvenience from catastrophe, and I know that my sense of perspective is
212 accurate. I accept that bad things will happen, and that's OK as this provides
213 me with valuable opportunities to grow as an athlete and as a person.

214 Not having my desires met is very tough and difficult to tolerate. But I
215 know I can tolerate this, because not getting what I want will not kill me or
216 cause so much pain that I disintegrate. Even if my strongest desires are not met
217 it is not unbearable. It is very hard not to be successful, not to perform
218 consistently, not be secure in my team, and not to keep developing my skills,
219 but I know that I can stand this. I also realize that I can tolerate being treated
220 unfairly and with disrespect, not being accepted and valued by coaches and
221 teammates, and not being given opportunities. Although I may feel frustrated
222 and upset and my goal attainment may be hindered, I know that I have the
223 capacity to tolerate failure, setbacks, and poor treatment. Importantly, I accept

224 that facing tough situations that do not meet my desires is OK as this provides
225 me with valuable opportunities to grow as an athlete and as a person.

226 Ultimately, tolerating bad situations is worthwhile because of the strength it
227 gives me to face future adversity.

228 If I fail to reach a goal, face an obstacle, or am treated poorly, I
229 recognize that this is bad, but says nothing about me as a person. I know that
230 failing does not make me a failure, that stumbling on the way to a goal does not
231 make me useless, and that not being respected or treated fairly does not mean I
232 am worthless. Similarly, succeeding does not mean I am a success, a smooth
233 path to my goal does not mean I am perfect, and being respected or treated
234 fairly does not make me a worthy person. I am able to distinguish between my
235 own behavior, and me as an athlete and human being. When I fall short, it just
236 shows that I am a fallible human being just like all other humans. Sometimes I
237 succeed, sometimes I fail, and that's fine. It's OK to feel upset when I fail, face
238 setbacks, or am treated poorly. These feelings motivate me to work on aspects
239 of myself that are hindering me, and approach others who do not meet my
240 desires as fellow fallible human beings capable of both good and bad actions.
241 When my coach or teammates treat me poorly, this is bad, but this does not
242 mean they are bad people. Not matter how bad things are, I realize that sport
243 and life is a mixture of good and bad events, and that the bad events test me
244 and provide valuable opportunities to grow as an athlete and as a person.

245 I want to endorse and live by this credo, but I cannot demand that I
246 must, and if I lapse or fail to live up to the credo, its not the end of the world, I
247 can tolerate it, and I know that this has nothing to do with my value or worth as
248 an athlete or human being. I recognize that the credo encourages me to be more

resilient to the adversities of my sport, but it is unrealistic to expect that I will always think in the ways that the credo promotes. I realize that striving to live by this credo will be hard work, and will involve practice and commitment, but this is nothing compared to the hard work it takes to be an athlete. If I work hard at this credo, I will be able to control how I react to the myriad of challenges that sport throws at me, without having to avoid adversity, becoming more resilient as I develop.

Advantages of the ARRC

The ARRC reflects an ideal philosophy for reacting to and approaching adversity, in that it assertively promotes the four core rational beliefs of REBT recognizing any irrational beliefs. The ARRC presented in this way boasts three main advantages. First, mirroring Dryden's (2007) assertions, the credo gives a clear indication of what athletes can aim for in order to achieve greater rationality and resilience. Second, not only are rational beliefs applied to athletes' sporting endeavors, rational beliefs are applied to the adherence to the credo itself in the final paragraph. This is so that the athlete is not encouraged to be irrationally perfectionistic about endorsing and living by the ARRC. Third, the credo ensures that the focus is on strengthening rational beliefs as a way to promote healthy emotions and behaviors instead of changing the adversity or avoiding tough situations. In REBT terms, this approach promotes B-C connections and dissuades A-C connections. That is, instead of falsely accepting that adversity (A) causes emotions and behaviors (C), the credo more accurately focuses on making beliefs (B) more rational to promote healthy emotions and behaviors.

Suggested uses for the ARRC

While the main purpose of the credo is to provide a set of beliefs by which an athlete can live, the ARRC can be used for many other purposes, all of which promote the internalization and use of rational beliefs. One of the most frequent ways I have used the credo with athletes is to ask the athlete to read and reflect on the ARRC as a daily task. For example, with one athlete I suggested he engage with the credo twice per day for a period of five-weeks. This not only involved him reading the credo, but also listening to it on an MP3 on his mobile phone that I had recorded for him, and spending time thinking about the meaning of each sentence. Indeed, with some athletes it may be unrealistic to expect them to read the credo daily. This task could be made more powerful if audio-recorded by the athletes themselves, given that the credo is written in first person. I would usually apply the ARRC in the third meeting after the athlete understands the REBT framework and therefore the themes in the credo. However, this is dependent on the speed at which the individual athlete is able to understand the REBT framework, as with some this may take only one session, whilst others may require five sessions. When the ARRC is applied, it begins to help the athlete to internalize the credo through repeatedly engaging in it. Further, as the athlete starts to engage in the credo regularly, they begin to think critically about what is written within it, instigating conversations about how the credo applies to them and their specific issues.

When I started to use the ARRC in my practice with athletes I noticed that athletes would come to sessions more versed in rational beliefs, therefore the work progressed more rapidly and more effectively. This is because we can quickly move from understanding REBT and rational beliefs, towards ingraining rational beliefs in their philosophy of success, failure, and ill treatment. Prior to using the ARRC in my practice, I would often have the same conversations with athletes in each session,

slowing the work down somewhat. Of course, there is no guarantee that an athlete will adhere to the credo away from one to one sessions. Therefore towards the end of my work with the athlete I will ask them to produce their own credo based on the ARRC. This helps me to determine how well they have learned the ARRC as this will be reflected in the detail and quality of their self-penned ARRC. In practice, this involves the athlete amending the ARRC to fit their specific sport and issues, enhancing the athlete's adherence to the credo by involving them in the production of their own personal ARRC. I will review their ARRC to ensure it meets REBT requirements, as it is important that the credo is not simply given to the athlete and then forgotten about. The credo should be revisited often during the work to ascertain which elements are being lived and the extent to which the athlete is truly able to adhere to the beliefs promoted within it. While the athlete may intellectually agree with the credo, actually living by it and striving to adhere to it takes consistent effort and practice that should be monitored and reviewed by the practitioner, just like all homework assignments. Each one to one session should begin with a review of the credo, how often it has been used and the impact the athlete perceives it to be having.

The ARRC is lengthy, and this is difficult to avoid because of its thorough and comprehensive coverage of rational beliefs. Indeed, some younger athletes, particularly those for whom readings is not viewed as pleasurable, have raised their eyebrows and exhaled forcefully when I have presented the credo to them. Therefore to combat this, another way I use the ARRC is to split it up into its constituent paragraphs in order to break the credo down into more manageable sections, and to help the athlete focus on particular rational beliefs instead of all of them. To explain, with one athlete (international Futsal player) his specific emotional dysfunction stemmed from his frustration intolerance derived from an irrational demand for fair

treatment by the coach. In this instance, after counseling him through the REBT process, I asked the athlete to read the first and third paragraphs of the ARRC, which expressly focus on preferences and frustration tolerance. This helped to reduce the workload for the athlete between sessions. For example, with a youth soccer academy athlete, I asked him to read the first paragraph of the ARRC once per day for one week, and then the next week I asked him to move onto the second paragraph for a week, and so on. The athlete eventually read all paragraphs, but breaking it up was more manageable for that particular athlete. While the athlete's specific irrational beliefs are the focus of the counseling sessions, the credo serves to more generally encourage rational beliefs helping to underpin the specific rational beliefs with a broader rational philosophy.

One final way that I have found the ARRC to be useful is helping the athlete to select small phrases for use as self-talk. This helps the athlete to approach or react to adverse events with a well-rehearsed rational self-statement that can promote emotional and behavioral control in the moment. For example, one athlete who found it difficult to control her anger when she felt victim to poor officiating decisions adopted the self-statement "I can tolerate being treated unfairly" and "although I may feel frustrated I know that I have the capacity to tolerate poor treatment," both of which are abridged derivatives of statements within the frustration tolerance paragraph of the ARRC. As a consequence, her anger was assuaged and so to was her tendency to lash out at the officials. To practice the self-talk statement/s I often use role-playing during sessions where the athlete and I recreate or imagine an adverse event (e.g., coach deselecting them), providing the athlete an opportunity to practice their rational self-talk. In addition, I provide the athlete with the collaboratively selected self-statements on several cue cards for placement in convenient locations

where the athlete will frequently see the cards (e.g., bedside table, kit bag, wallet). This is a useful way to help the athlete internalize the statements for ready use when an adverse situation arises, and is particularly useful when contact with the athlete is limited due to time and cost restrictions, which is typical with elite athletes with whom I work with privately (i.e., not via their club). The self-talk statements provide a focus for the athletes when approaching pressure situations for example. One athlete adopted the “If I fail to reach a goal...I recognize that this is bad, but says nothing about me as a person” portion of the ARRC, in an effort to reduce the anxiety she felt prior to making the step up from club to international volleyball.

Limitations of the ARRC

The most serious limitation I have found with using the ARRC is that it is not possible to know whether and to what extent the athlete is engaging in the credo away from sessions. Adherence is a key consideration for all psychological techniques that require independent application (Bull, 1991). Therefore it is not advised that the credo is used by itself in the absence of REBT support, because the credo has been developed to support the REBT process, not replace it. Another potential limitation may be the length of the ARRC, which may deter some athletes from adhering to it. Indeed, some athletes may find the process of reading the entire ARRC unappealing. Indeed, with one athlete I worked with the ARRC did not have the desired effect (of lowering irrational beliefs) because the athlete did not have the time to engage in the credo, and did not see the value in writing things down when he could be spending this time physically training instead. However, as stated earlier in this paper, the ARRC can be broken down into smaller sections to reduce the time and effort requirements on the athlete. Also, the credo forms a small but important part of a broader REBT approach that encompasses many other cognitive, emotional, and

behavioral homework tasks. Therefore, the athlete is encouraged to engage in various engaging tasks alongside the credo. From my experience, having the athlete engage in writing their own credo can assuage adherence issues, and so to can reviewing how the athlete has used the ARRC between sessions as part of the opening conversation of each one to one session. More broadly, the applied parameters of the ARRC have yet to be established, and clearly empirical study is required to assess its effectiveness across athletes of various sports, levels, and ages. The current paper offers anecdotal support for the ARRC, and to date, the ARRC has been applied in my practice with athletes aged between 16 and 50. Thus the effects of the ARRC on younger athletes are not currently known. Also, I have encouraged athletes to read the ARRC (their own or the one provided in this paper) twice per day over a five-week period, which is based on how I work rather than any solid scientific rationale, and I have found this to be sufficient to accelerate reductions in irrational beliefs. Therefore, the frequency and length of engagement in the ARRC for maximal effectiveness is yet to be established. The limitations detailed here provide ample justification for further exploration of the use of the ARRC with athletes in the field, and experimentally in controlled laboratory settings.

Concluding comments

This paper presents the ARRC as a valuable tool to help athletes develop rational beliefs that can help them to respond resiliently to adversity. The ARRC is not a panacea for irrational beliefs, but if adhered to by athletes can speed up the rate at which an athlete is able to replace irrational beliefs with rational beliefs. The extant research and REBT theory clearly advocates the promotion of rational beliefs for functional emotional and behavioral responding, and the REBT therapeutic ABCDE process is well validated in non-sporting and sporting settings (e.g., Turner, 2014).

Techniques that can support this process are valuable in sport research as the literature concerning REBT is still sparse. Drawing on Dryden's (2007) original Rational Resilience Credo, the ARRC reflects a sport relevant credo that can be utilized in various flexible ways to advance an athlete's conviction in their rational beliefs. Future research should elucidate the precise effects of the ARRC above and beyond the application of REBT alone, and determine the parameters within which the ARRC can be applied. It is hoped that this paper encourages REBT practitioners working in sport to adopt the credo as part of their practice with athletes. More broadly, it is hoped that practitioners are encouraged to investigate REBT further for similarly transferable techniques.

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